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Caution urged in oil spill cleanup

Published: May 5, 2010 at 3:31 PM

BERKELEY, Calif., May 5 (UPI) -- A U.S. ecologist is urging extreme caution in the cleanup of the fragile Gulf Coast ecosystem in the aftermath of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill.

Terry Hazen, a microbial ecologist at the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, said detergents used to clean oil contaminated sites can make a bad situation even worse.

"The concentration of detergents and other chemicals used to cleanup sites contaminated by oil spills can cause environmental nightmares of their own," Hazen said. "It is important to remember that oil is a biological product and can be degraded by microbes, both on and beneath the surface of the water. Some of the detergents that are typically used to cleanup spill sites are more toxic than the oil itself, in which case it would be better to leave the site alone and allow microbes to do what they do best."

The Deepwater Horizon oil rig leased by BP Plc that exploded and sank April 20 is now disgorging thousands of gallons of oil daily into the Gulf of Mexico, officials said.

Hazen said aggressive cleanup efforts are fraught with unintended consequences,

He cites as a prime example the Amoco Cadiz disaster.

In 1978, an oil tanker, the Amoco Cadiz, split in two about three miles off the coast of Normandy, releasing about 227,000 tons of heavy crude oil that ultimately stained nearly 200 miles of coastline. He said the spill-site was so large, only areas of great economic impact were treated with detergents. Large regions in more remote parts of the coast went untreated.

"The untreated coastal areas were fully recovered within five years of the Amoco Cadiz spill," Hazen said. "As for the treated areas, ecological studies show that 30 years later, those areas still have not recovered."